

Sonnet XXI

Glossary

dost	does
cuckoo-song	the song of the cuckoo bird
cuckoo-strain	the notes of the cuckoo song
doubtful	uncertain, unconvinced
toll	To ring (as in 'tolling of a bell')
iterance	repetition, doing something again

Summary

more acceptance

This sonnet shows far more acceptance of the lover's affection. The persona begs him to tell her again and again that he loves her. She says she can never hear words of his love too much. The love seems to have been accepted and the thrill it gives the persona, now she has opened her heart to it, is immense.



Discussion

1st open declaration

The sonnet is addressed to the lover who is affectionately called "Beloved". Of the poems set for study, this is the first time she has openly referred to him as the one she loves. She entreats him to repeat his words of love: "say again and yet again / That thou dost love me". The repetition of

Love essential

poet as centre

"again" adds emphasis to her entreaty and her tone is pleading. This is different to the preceding sonnets XIII and XIV which centre more on the lover. While the persona's affection is implied, it is not the focus. This progression shows her acceptance of her reliance on the love. To many this sonnet reveals she the love has become essential to her.

She likens his telling her he loves her, the simple "word repeated", to a cuckoo-song. A cuckoo has a call much like its name and is a constant repetition of this sound - *cuck-oo, cuck-oo, cuck-oo, cuck-oo*. She says that's how he treats it. Some have seen this to show he speaks of his love non-stop and that, while she delights in this, she doesn't want him to underestimate their importance to her. Possibly she means that he is sporadic in his outbursts since a cuckoo comes only a few months to England but this seems unlikely given his letters to her. Either way, she wants him to realise his words of love are essential to her life and not mere sounds.

She represents this idea by reminding her lover that the cuckoo is the herald of Spring. In Britain, the song of the cuckoo is said to be a first sign of Spring. The persona makes the point that without the song, the land ("hill & plain, / Valley & wood") would not be made green. Hence she links the cuckoo-song the fertility and life of the land. Remember, Spring symbolically, is the time of fecundity and new life. Like the song of the cuckoo complete the season, his words of love give her life wholeness. In this way, the love of Browning can be seen to offer Barrett Browning life.

The exclamation marks reflect the depth of her feeling and the importance she attached to his love. To contrast this bright, idyllic image of Spring she speaks of her life's past darkness and the uncertainty she felt:

*I, amid the darkness greeted
By a doubtful spirit*

Don't forget in Sonnet I she also depicted her life as in darkness and she commented before Browning she was living death in life. Here the persona is expressing her incredulity at his love. It seems she feared his candour before because of her doubts but now she has changed. The repeated ellipses help show this as does the exclamation mark after "lovest". Her joy is clear and this sonnet is far more frank and vibrant as she shares that delight.

open in her declaration

She then speaks of other things that there can never be too many of - stars and flowers. Notably these are both elements of the natural world and through this association Barrett Browning implies his words of love are equally natural. The repetition of the line structure ("Too many ..., though each...") creates a pleasant aural echo which reflects her desire for reiteration. This is then reinforced in the line "Say though dost love me, love me, love me" which not only mimics the cuckoo-song but also her breathless pleasure.

She then asks for the "silver iterance" to be tolled, as in rung like a bell. The use of silver works on many levels. It is the colour of the cuckoo bird but also has connotations of value. It also refers to sweet talking as in 'silver tongued' and has aural attractiveness in the assonance of the "i".

However, as a final comment, the persona reminds the lover that she also wants to be loved spiritually, "with thy soul" not just with his words. So while words are important to her she reminds him she needs a spiritual connection. Here Barrett Browning reminds us of Sonnet XIV where she wants to be loved for "love's sake". Referring to the lover as

spiritual connection too

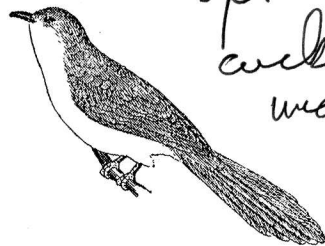
"dear" she once again reveals her own affection. The sonnet does not end in unrestrained rapture but is controlled and serious, as befits the sonnet form.

Ideas

The power of love / Love provides hope

This sonnet, like many of those earlier, explores the importance and power of love. Now that she has experienced love the persona seems unable to be fulfilled without it. She uses the image of the cuckoo-song and how it symbolises the awakening of spring. This parallels her own awakening. The love she has received and felt has given her life – quite literally when we remember that Barrett Browning had actually accepted that her end was coming and that she was awaiting death before she met Browning. So in the same way that the cuckoo signals the beginning of life, so too has the lover's affection. Her health has improved by the sheer power of the unexpected love. There is an optimistic hope for the future symbolised by the significance of his repeated words of love. She feels they can mean more than simple sounds.

It is essential you appreciate the importance of spring as a symbol in the poem and remember that in the Northern Hemisphere spring follows a far colder, bleaker winter than we will ever know in the Southern Hemisphere. When temperatures drop below zero and ice lays thick on the ground flora and fauna withdraw. Hence winter is used to symbolise death.



spring-
cuckoo
image

unfortunate
of love-
now
needs
it

In this way the metaphor of the cuckoo-song is a powerful technique to show the transformation of the persona's life. It is the power of the love that has awakened her.

The necessity of love for fulfilment

Linked to the importance of love is the idea of the necessity of love. It is interesting that the uncertain persona of the earlier sonnets has been replaced by this, almost brazen, speaker who insists on hearing words of love. This is ironic since in Sonnet XIII she was refusing to articulate her feelings. The sonnet explains this change by the dependence the persona has developed for love. It has strengthened her physically and emotionally. The love that she has received and felt has also awakened her need for such affection. Love has shown her the way to self-fulfilment. She uses the image of the cuckoo-song completing spring to show this.

Indeed the desperation in the pleading tone she uses when she begs, "Beloved, say again and yet again / That thou dost love me" reveals her need. She emphasises she can never hear too much and this is because, like the cuckoo-song completes the arrival of spring, his love fulfils her, giving her vitality.

Mortality

The new birth image of spring establishes her new interest in life. The love is making her complete and it reminds us that Barrett Browning is being sustained and made healthy through the love. It is clear she has rejected thoughts of death.

Sonnet XXI - Questions

1. Summarise this poem in FIVE points.
2. In your own words, explain how Barrett Browning makes the image of the cuckoo-song an effective way to represent the importance of his words of love.
3. a. Examine the structure of the sonnet. Summarise its features (ie. rhyme scheme, line stresses, line syllables, idea development)

b. How tightly is it organised?
4. Explain how Barrett Browning has used punctuation to help represent her ideas.
5. What is the effect of referring to stars and flowers in the sestet?
6. Create a visual representation that reflects the ideas of this sonnet. You might focus on the power of love but might also include ideas about the necessity of love for fulfilment.